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Weighing the pros &



PHOTO: DOUG SHANKS

Joyce Wilson runs seven housing projects in the Downtown Eastside. Supportive housing, she says, can "make a huge difference to people's dignity and safety."

New plan aims to build homes for those battling addiction, mental-health issues

By Magda Ibrahim

Hundreds of homes for addicts and the mentally ill may be built over the next 10 years as part of an ambitious plan to address the city's affordable-housing problems.

At least 450 additional homes are needed for people with drug and alcohol addiction or mental health issues, according to a draft strategy put together by local planners and health officials.

Linda Thomas, director of housing at Vancouver Coastal Health, recognizes that some residents adjacent to the proposed housing sites may be wary about the effects it could have on their neighbourhoods, but said the emphasis of the plan is on spreading construction throughout the city. "Some communities do feel overwhelmed, but once the buildings are there then they realize that these are just people," she said.

The aim is to provide affordable housing for those already getting help for addiction or mental illness, as well as for people who are not currently in treatment. Up to 170 of the 450 units are set to be 'low barrier' housing; that is, for men and women who may be living on the streets and not receiving any treatment for their problems.

With an estimated 1,200 homeless people in Vancouver, the proposal of 450 homes may seem to be a drop in the bucket, but Thomas is optimistic about its potentially positive effects.

The plan, officially known as the Draft Supportive Housing Strategy, proposes to construct at least three low-barrier buildings in the Downtown Eastside, although exact locations have yet to be pinpointed.

Another six buildings are planned for people in treatment for mental illness, with four more proposed for those getting help with addiction.

Thomas said she was confident the new housing — particularly the low-barrier projects — would make a difference. "It gets people off the streets and out of the shelters," she added. "But we have to remember this is not a *fait accompli*; it is a plan, and it will only go forward if we have the money."

The plans for the housing are being discussed in a series of public meetings around Vancouver, and members of the community will be given a chance to share their views with

city staff, who will report back to the council next month.

Patricia Canning, of the Strathcona Revitalization Committee, attended the March 23 meeting at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre on East Hastings, and raised concerns about the plans. "Many of these people are aggressive simply because of their addiction or mental illness, and I've met them on the sidewalk by my house," she said. "This is madness. To overcome people's fears about mental illness and addiction is very hard to do."

A total of 37 supportive-housing buildings already exist in Vancouver, and another five have received funding and will open in the next two years.

Joyce Wilson has worked for the Lookout Emergency Aid Society for the past 11 years and runs seven housing projects in the Downtown Eastside. She believes that proper housing is the backbone of society and can help people make dramatic changes to their lives. "Simple things like having your own washroom make a huge difference to people's dignity and safety. It means they matter," she said. "The goal when we bring people into housing is to hook them up with the resources they need and eventually get them to the highest level of independence for them. Sometimes that takes a very long time."

If the city adopts the strategy, the next hurdle will be raising the cash. With each bachelor or one-bedroom apartment costing between \$150,000 and \$200,000 to build, the 10-year plan does not come cheap. The costs of running supportive housing are estimated at \$25-30 per unit per day, with the low barrier projects clocking in at up to \$10 more than that.

"The strategy is just the tip of the iceberg, but there is the recognition of the problem," said Wilson. "But whether there is enough money over the long term, I don't know."

To have your say on plans for social housing, attend one of the public discussion meetings:

- Thursday, Apr. 5: Croatian Cultural Centre (3250 Commercial), 7 p.m.
- Wednesday, Apr. 11: Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House (4065 Victoria), 7 p.m.
- Thursday, Apr. 12: South Vancouver Neighbourhood House (6470 Victoria), 7 p.m. (Punjabi interpretation provided.)
- Tuesday, Apr. 17: Chinese Cultural Centre (50 E. Pender), 7 p.m. (Cantonese and Mandarin interpretation provided.)
- Wednesday, Apr. 18: St. Mary's Church (2940 W. 37th), 7 p.m.
- Tuesday, Apr. 24: St. Andrew's-Wesley Church (1012 Nelson), 7 p.m. WE



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cons of supportive housing

Public forum spotlights ongoing concern for St. Paul's

It's hard to imagine bubbly, energetic Nancy Lafleche as a desperate junkie with a \$50-a-day heroin habit. Which is one of the reasons why she finds it so difficult to tell new friends the story behind her amputated leg.

The 33-year-old, who was a youth worker before her heroin addiction began in 2002, was told by doctors she was lucky to be alive after a botched suicide attempt.

"I was living a double life, because my friends didn't do this kind of stuff," said Lafleche. "I would barely leave the house except to meet my dealer."

"The final month before I tried to kill myself was just unbearable. My life had gone downhill very quickly."

Lafleche took a cocktail of sleeping pills and heroin, and passed out at her home on Commercial Drive. It was two days before anyone found her, and by then her body had started to shut down. "My kidneys were failing and part of my leg was already dead," said Lafleche, who now lives in supportive housing with her 10-year-old dog, Chachi. "I was in a coma in the hospital for about a week before I came around. My doctor told me she [sees this] every day and there was no reason I should be alive."

Despite the tragic loss of her leg, Lafleche continued to use heroin, even during her daily physiotherapy trips. It was only when her counsellor helped her get placement in a recovery house that things started to change.



Nancy Lafleche, a recovered heroin addict, lives in supportive housing, which she credits with contributing to her getting clean.

PHOTO: DOUG SHANKS

Lafleche subsequently had to work hard to meet regulations to get into her current home, but she recently celebrated a year of being clean. The promising athlete now trains almost full-time with wheelchair basketball team the BC Breakers, and hopes to

go to the Olympic and Paralympic Games in London, England, in 2012.

"I have had a second chance to rewrite my ending, and it is going to be a better ending," said Lafleche.

If you'd like to make a donation to help Lafleche buy a specially-designed sport wheelchair, visit the BC Wheelchair Basketball Society's website at BCWBS.ca.

Magda Ibrahim

NEWS BRIEFS

By Magda Ibrahim

Lack of transparency about the future of St. Paul's Hospital is igniting suspicion among local residents, according to a concerned health campaigner.

More than 200 people attended a forum last Sunday (Apr. 1) at the West End Community Centre to discuss plans for the Burrard Street hospital. Aaron Jasper, chairman of the Save St. Paul's Coalition, said the general feeling at the meeting was one of deep concern. "People are cynical, and that was the tone of the meeting," he said. "No one seems to be able to get any information about the project, and that is very much against the spirit of what we want."

St. Paul's Hospital's future at its current site has been a subject of scrutiny and debate for some time. Under the scheme titled the Legacy Project, hospital owner Providence Health Care is weighing the pros and cons of redeveloping St. Paul's on Burrard or building a new hospital at a site three kilometres away in False Creek Flats. According to the proposal, the redevelopment would take about 15 years, while building at a new location would take five to seven years.

"We are urbanites and [are] used to this kind of development, so I think most people would be happy with the disruption if it meant keeping a full-service hospital in the downtown core," said Jasper. "I think Providence sees this as an opportunity to sell some real estate, and what gets lost is the discussion around healthcare."

Answering questions at the forum was Neil MacConnell, vice president of the Legacy Project. He stressed that the project's only aim is to provide healthcare in a way that will meet today's demands. "We have been here 100 years and are trying to create an opportunity to be here for the next 100 years," he said. "We want to deliver care in a way that benefits the patient more."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Is supportive housing a good thing for those with addiction and mental-health problems?



Dr. Steven Lake, 53, West End

"We need to take care of those people who need support. I think it's cost effective and the right thing to do. After all, we are all related. I would rather have people with good housing than have them sleeping on the street. In fact, I'd be really happy to have a house like that in my area."



Andre Guyot, 43, flight attendant, West End

"Someone has got to do something, because society is passing the buck all the time. There is always a lot of talk, but whether it becomes concrete or not is the big issue. You will get people screaming that they don't want it in their neighbourhood, but it wouldn't bother me. They have to go somewhere."



Shahla Masoumnejad, 54, anthropologist, West End

"I think addiction is one of the main problems in Vancouver — it is the worst thing for the city. I know there are shelters here doing a lot of work, but when I came as an immigrant from Iran, I couldn't accept the level of homelessness. It is good to have the extra supportive housing, particularly if it helps people deal with addiction."



Wanqing Tian, 24, student, North Shore

"I don't know that if there was more affordable housing available it would ease the problems faced by the homeless, addicts and the mentally ill. I agree these are big issues in Vancouver, but I think it is worse in China, where I am from. But I do think the government should provide more housing."

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